
理论与应用 ● ● ● ● ●

A Reading of Rossi-Landi’s Critique on “*Ideologies of Linguistic Relativity*”

Andrea D’ Urso

Abstract: Rossi-Landi’s text “*Ideologies of Linguistic Relativity*” is probably the most merciless critique ever made of Sapir-Whorf’s thesis, although it remains, perhaps for this very reason, the least known, discussed and developed among the scientific objections aroused against linguistic relativity. Rossi-Landi points out its idealistic and bourgeois basis, which brought its theorists to ideological deformations in their formulations, especially in their conception of the relationships between language and thought. Rossi-Landi demystifies them through his semiotics. He explains why what we call *linguistic relativity* could develop as a theory or a hypothesis through the study of American Indian languages. He shows a series of confusions and reifications it gave birth and suggests another way of considering the problems aroused by linguistic relativity: that one of a dialectical-materialist approach taking account of the alienated condition of speakers, of their material and linguistic exploitation through social models and programs, and of the possibilities of their emancipation.

Keywords: Rossi-Landi, ideology, Marxism, semiotics, American Indians, linguistic relativity

解读罗西·兰迪对《语言相对论的意识形态》的批判

安德里亚·迪尔索

摘要：罗西·兰迪《语言相对论的意识形态》一文可能是对萨丕尔-沃尔夫观点最为无情的一次批判。也许正因如此，该文应当算是诸多反语言相对论的学说中，最不知名的一个，因而也极少被讨论。罗西·兰迪指出，正是语言相对论的理想主义机器资产阶级基础，导致该领域的理论家在进行理论构建时，其意识形态发生了扭曲。而这种扭曲，在这些学者思考语言与思想之关系时，会变得更为明显。罗西·兰迪借助其符号学理论对此进行了解释，他阐明为何通过美国印第安人语言进行研究，可提出语言相对论这一理论或假说。他指出一系列由语言相对论所引起的困惑和混淆，并倡导用另一种方法去解释语言相对论所引发的的问题，即一种辩证唯物主义者方法，这种方法需要顾及说话者之间的亲疏状况，他们通过社会模式和项目对物质和语言的开发情况，以及他们获得解放的可能性。

关键词：罗西·兰迪，意识形态，马克思主义，符号学，美国印第安人，语言相对论

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I. Introduction: the up-to-dateness of Rossi-Landi's Marxist semiotics

Why speak today of a text that Ferruccio Rossi-Landi published in 1968 in his journal *Ideologie* (co-directed by Antonio Melis) and translated into English in 1973?^① The almost forty-five years that have passed since must not allow us to think it is a nostalgic celebration. Recalling such a Rossi-Landian essay on “Ideologies of

① (Cf. Rossi-Landi, 1968a.) Quotations from the pages indicated in brackets in our text refer to Rossi-Landi 1973. In order to avoid lengthening our contribution and in view of the notoriety of Sapir-Whorf's theory, of the rarity of discussions about Rossi-Landi's essay and of its English edition itself, we will limit our exposition and our bibliographical references to his specific reflection. An Italian version of this article appeared as “Sulla critica rossi-landiana delle ideologie della relatività linguistica”(in *RIFL*, 2013, pp. 15 – 28) .

Linguistic Relativity” is useful for several reasons, first of all because it was not given the same attention and mention as his most known works, such as *Il linguaggio come lavoro e come mercato* (1968).

Besides this reason, our contribution specifically responds to the launch of the new section “Marxist Semiotics” in the issue 13 of this journal, where several scholars analyzed the role of Marxist Dialectics and categories, such as that of commodity, in semiotics. No doubt that no one more than Rossi-Landi deserves a place in this context for his developments on Marxian Political Economics and Gramscian semiotic intuition about consensus, as Susan Petrilli (2016) carefully showed through her richly detailed historical and bibliographical reconstruction in that same issue of *Signs & Media*, to which I address the readers for more information on Rossi-Landi’s production. The fact that Augusto Ponzio promoted in 2016 the publication of the Italian edition of *Linguistics and Economics* is further demonstration of Rossi-Landi’s up-to-dateness and anticipations about the present stage of capitalism exploiting so-called “cognitive” or “immaterial” work^①. In this regard, our contribution can be considered as a modest follow-up to S. Petrilli’s article and *Signs & Media*’s methodological aims.

Moreover, with its 180 bibliographical references (plus a hundred added in 1971 for the English edition), already “proportionately pruned” (Rossi-Landi, 1973, p. 80) compared to a book he planned on this subject matter^②, Rossi-Landi’s essay is useful and important, for it gives us some idea of the state of the research on linguistic relativity till that date, thus describing the guidelines of studies (pro and con) and providing a body of knowledge still useful nowadays to reconstruct the history of this theory from its origins up to its evolutions in the early 70’s. But there is also another important factor in Rossi-Landi’s text: it is probably the most merciless critique ever made of Sapir-Whorf’s thesis, although it remains, perhaps for this very reason, the least known, discussed and developed among the scientific

① On these subjects, (cf. Ponzio, 2008) and his “Premessa” (Rossi-Landi, 2016, pp.9 – 10). For recent dialectical-materialistic developments inspired by an application of Rossi-Landi’s semiotics in the fields of literary criticism, theory of values, feminism and W. Benjamin’s translation theory. (cf. our numerous essays in international journals and collective books at <https://unisalento.academia.edu/AndreaD'Urso>).

② This project of book is cited in the Italian version only (Rossi-Landi, 1968, p. 187), under the title of *Linguaggio e visione del mondo*; it seems to us that it became Rossi-Landi’s unsurpassed masterpiece *Ideologia* (1978).

objections aroused. These aspects of usefulness in speaking today of this Rossi-Landian essay are also those that give some idea of its being still up-to-date. Let us try, then, to illustrate Rossi-Landi's reflections by taking into account the salient points we have just briefly outlined.

II. Ideology, Colonialism and Materialistic Semiotics

Still up-to-date is his prudence in presenting linguistic relativity: "Whether we are dealing with a thesis proper or with a mere working hypothesis is precisely one of the questions to be answered." (p. 1) He summed up its assumption in this way: "The global structure of every language exercises a differential influence on the thought of the speaker, on the way in which he conceives reality, and the manner in which he behaves in front of it." (p. 1) Well aware of the charm and the resistance it provokes, of the facility with which it can be as accepted and taken for granted as dismantled and rejected, Rossi-Landi seems to explain us, already in 1968, the reasons why linguistic relativity appears still attractive nowadays: "The general impression is that the thesis, in spite of its eel-like nature but partly also because of it, retains considerable importance; not for nothing does it periodically come to life again, just when people think they have buried it." (p. 2) The author likes to underline in several passages of his text that the problematical questions this thesis arouses, "which do not usually fall within the province of the various specialists and which seem to demand treatment of a more general kind" (p. 2), imply the difficulty to confine and disentangle them within a specialized discipline, even linguistics, which seems the best equipped.^① For the same reason, the accurate destructive neo-positivistic critiques do not bring the issue to an acceptable end:

The analysis must be continued on another ground, introducing new interpretative criteria and changing the point of view in a radical manner. And so we meet again, on a new ground, formulations which recall those which the idealists had indeed glimpsed, and which even the most up-to-date positivists seem constitutionally incapable of seeing. (pp. 2 - 3)

^① In a footnote of the Italian version, the author states that in such a case "the interdisciplinary character as well as the general human and political interest of the problems of linguistic relativity—for the solution or, at least, the clarification of which (as we try to show in our text) *the instruments of any separate specialization do not suffice*—would be lost" (cf. Rossi-Landi, 1968, p. 125).

This perspective is already a sign of Rossi-Landi's dialectical-materialistic approach:

Many arguments against linguistic relativity are correct in the sense that they refute the idealistic illusion held by its supporters. [...] But at the same time one must comprehend the, as it were, hidden motives of those who uphold linguistic relativity. To be rendered valid, these motives must be demystified. Here too, the road is that of turning upside down an idealistic conclusion. Only in this way can an attempt be made to raise the whole discussion to a higher dialectical level. (p. 77)

Why this reference to idealists? Rossi-Landi traces back the origins of linguistic relativity to Wilhelm von Humboldt and his successors in the 20th century, Leo Weisgerber and Jost Trier, by stating in addition the lack of a real study on these authors in particular and on this subject matter in general in Italian books, journals and meetings of the years in which Rossi-Landi was writing his text, except for “a few remarks to be found in works dedicated to other subjects” or “some cursory reports contained in popular manuals” (p. 3, note 4).^① Even if he knows that “in the United States, without direct reference to Humboldt and independently of European scholars, the thesis was rediscovered (or re-invented) by Edward Sapir (1884 – 1939) and, especially, Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897 – 1941)” —he who, in the 30s, put forward “the most brilliant, stimulating, and fruitful formulations of the thesis, which are still passionately debated” (p. 1) — Rossi-Landi does not hesitate to say in advance that, anyway, “we are dealing with a substantially neo-idealistic thesis” (p. 2). These critical remarks must not be underestimated: we must not forget that Rossi-Landi was writing then on the basis of knowledge, experience and expertise he had reached through his direct studies of German and American texts and his relationship *in situ* with the Oxford analytical philosophers (Austin and others) in the early 50s, and with the young scholars of philosophy at the University of Ann Arbor (Michigan) and Austin (Texas), for whom in 1962 – 63 he had held two seminars about linguistic relativity, used in his essay (p. 80).^② These considerations make the Rossi-Landian critique much more timely and pertinent.

^① Compare this footnote with the n°3 and n°58 in the Italian edition (Rossi-Landi, 1968, pp. 127, 186).

^② Cf. the Italian final “Note” (Rossi-Landi, 1968, pp. 185 – 188) that is more extensive than the English one.

Let us come to the point and see then what it consists of, leaving aside Rossi-Landi's reflections on a series of problems connected to the theory of linguistic relativity that cannot be recalled here (the experience of one's own mother tongue; the formation, formulations and excessive interpretations of that thesis; Hopi's language and vision of the world; holism in Wintu; the "chemical language" of Navajos; presumed influences of language on thought; etc.). Here is the core of his criticism:

It is not without significance that the ideology on which linguistic relativity rests is projected and expressed precisely in certain generalizations drawn from the study of the American Indian languages. Both the invitation to better understanding them, to avoid overwhelming them metaphysically, and the defence of their *Weltanschauungen* from scientific progress manifest the guilt feelings of American whites for having savagely destroyed the Indians beyond any possible need, I do not say of expansion, but even of personal defence. (p. 72)

These remarks are not gratuitous and without purpose: they are part of Rossi-Landi's materialistic semiotics and of its revolutionary implications. In fact, we must not forget that following and prolonging the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, Rossi-Landi's theory of the *homology between linguistic production and material production* propose to consider *language as work and trade*, beyond a mere metaphor to which it was sometimes reduced by his commentators, till establishing a schema of *homological correspondences* between material objects and linguistic artefacts. Putting at the basis of human evolution—as it was described by Hegel, Marx and Engels—the ability to work, Rossi-Landi sees in “*social reproduction* as the principle of all things” the two fields that determine it—material production of objects and linguistic production of verbal and non-verbal signs—at the level of their common root from which they rise and split into diversified products: *work*, in fact. So language (considered in general, that is, “*linguaggio*” in Italian or “*langage*” in French) is work, while each socio-historical language (that is “*lingua*” or “*langue*”) is the *product* of this work, a product that can be used or re-introduced in the process of production as a *material* or as an *instrument* for new work, like in the production of material

objects.^①

Since language as *langue* can be considered as product, material, instrument and *money* (for it is also the means of communicative exchange *par excellence*), it can be defined as “constant (linguistic) capital”. But it would only be a dead language-similar to an abandoned factory with its materials and machines that no one uses anymore-if it were not kept alive by “linguistic workers”, that is, the “variable capital” Rossi-Landi also calls “talking commodity”, following Marx’s analysis of the reduction of workmen to commodity through wages. In fact, the portion of capital consisting of language as *langue*, to subsist, function and reproduce itself, needs the variable portion, that is, those who speak it: “linguistic workers”. So “they are produced by language (*langage*), that is, by their being a portion of linguistic production, a controllable and exploitable element of it [...]; by handing the language down from generation to generation, linguistic alienation is also handed down”.^② Here is “the new ground” above-mentioned on which Rossi-Landi suggested continuing the theory of linguistic relativity to avoid idealisms and neo-positivisms: the ground of a dialectical-materialistic semiotics knowing how to take into account the alienated condition of speakers, their exploitation through social models and programs put into effect by *ideology*. This last must be conceived as *social practice*, for it is aimed at achieving a project of society. As such, it can be conservative, or even reactionary, or, on the contrary, revolutionary, as Rossi-Landi explains in *Ideologia (Marxism and Ideology)*.

This key allows us to interpret all the elements linked to the theory of linguistic relativity, starting, for example, from the experience of one’s own mother tongue, in which one learns to speak. No matter what the specific mother tongue is, the Rossi-Landian scheme is always valid. Everyone has its own *unrepeatable* experience (because one learns to “speak” only once, even if it is in a fully bilingual context) with materials, instruments and money of the “patrimony” (or constant capital) of its own linguistic group, through productive processes that are on the contrary *repeatable* (as products themselves are) and “practised in common by speakers”,

① For English bibliographical references on the theory of homology (cf. Rossi-Landi, 1968, 1975, 1992).

② For these quotations and developments (cf. Rossi-Landi, 1992, pp. 258 – 259) .

thus constituting what Rossi-Landi calls “collective or common speech” (p. 4). From this standpoint, it is easy to understand that the production of “linguistic workers” with a language (as *langue*) takes on more tragic aspects in the case of colonial domination:

If noticeable traces of the African languages of slaves imported into the United States still remained there, these languages too would certainly have been used to furnish examples in support of linguistic relativity. But no traces are there, for the excellent reason that the children of the slaves were taken away from their mothers so that they would not learn their own language and would have to accept only English as their mother tongue. So that the capital constituted by the slaves might be exploited without hindrance, it was necessary to alter their natures; and with a singular though hideous intuition this was done at the root, taking away from them even their mother tongue. By their insertion into English linguistic production their use in material production was enormously facilitated. (p. 72)

The case of American Indians witnesses of the usual praxis of exterminating the speakers of languages belonging to “primitive” societies, unable to resist the onslaught of civilisations more advanced than they were in the technology of material production, although not necessarily in that of linguistic production. In many cases the total capital of others has been attacked in its variable component: the method has been that of *physically destroying* the speakers. (“He was killed because he *said* things that did not please the bosses.” In this sentence a relationship is stated which still holds true in 1968 and also among whites.) The immense wealth of the American Indian languages regarding man-nature relationships, which was evidence of a human situation less alienated than ours, was destroyed by extermination of the Indians. [...] Hence—with the reawakening in the twentieth century of interest in diversity—the feeling of guilt in those who have approached the American Indian world with such historically belated understanding and admiration; hence the ideological desire to restore to the Indians of America, at least in theory, something that had been stripped from their most intimate and familiar nucleus of their stolen patrimony—that is, all they knew how to do and transmitted to their children as original and autonomous linguistic workers. The variable capital having been almost entirely destroyed (without residue in the majority of cases, since a good part of the American Indian languages are now extinct), the attempt was made to revalue the corresponding constant capital, to bring the extinct workers back to life by re-evoking the wealth of their working processes. Thus those linguistic workers, who previously had been treated only as things, are now

being used as ghosts. (pp. 77 – 78)

III. Language and Thought: The *Ideological Distortions of Linguistic Relativity*

The cynical lexicon with which Rossi-Landi replies to the cynicism of colonial slaughters allows us to see some ideological distortions and illusions of linguistic relativity. Indeed, language-in-general (*le langage*) is the dialectical sum of a language (*une langue*) and common speech (pp. 4, 63); in other words, language considered as work in a Rossi-Landian way is the dialectical sum of materials and instruments on which and with which we work, and of “the techniques, intersubjective, superpersonal, collective, communitary, in short, those that are in various ways common to all speakers—with which we express ourselves and communicate when we use a language” (p. 62).

In this perspective, we can also understand the reasonable neo-positivistic criticism (chiefly that of Black, Feuer, Lenneberg) made of the theory of linguistic relativity, that is, “the argument that different thoughts and conceptions have been developed in the same language, and that the same thought and conception has found expression in different languages” (pp. 72 – 73), as well as the objection that translation is in general possible from one language to another. Rossi-Landi recalls that Sapir himself asserts “one of the fundamental hypotheses of linguistics [...] that in every natural language [...] anything can be expressed and communicated” (p. 62). Otherwise, we could not explain the fact

that (1) a language, considered objectively in a particular moment of its development as a closed system, may not yet have been used to express certain thoughts which later on will be expressed in it (this is the case of Hebrew, Arabic, and Latin before Aristotelian metaphysics were expressed in them; it is also the case of English before Whorf expressed the structure of Hopi in it); (2) it is after all possible to translate, even if we do have to combat certain difficulties (chapter 11^①): it must be argued that every language possesses a generative and self-extensive power, or better that it can be

① “The question of translating” is exposed in the 11th chapter of his essay; in this connection, he also recalls, in a witty remark, the paradox of the hypothesis of linguistic relativity: “precisely what Whorf and the others have done has been to give us, in English, linguistic universes very different from our own; were their own theses completely correct, they could never have done this.” (Rossi-Landi, 1973, p. 54)

subjected to such power. (p. 62)

But Rossi-Landi's purpose is to show the mistakes that theorists of linguistic relativity made and that are "ideological" in a sense he would define later in *Ideologia*: in this specific case, chiefly *confusions*, *reifications* and *separatisms*.

To recapitulate, the thesis of linguistic relativity, on the one hand, stands on a splitting of the language [*langue*] from the rest of language [*langage*], which leads it to ignore the self-extensive power of language itself; while on the other hand it mentalizes the use of the language, that is, it confuses, in bourgeois fashion, the use of already existing linguistic capital with its production, and attributes, to the system of products, properties which by rights belong only to labour. (p. 65)^①

Let us try to look nearer at these two points, by beginning from the former:

The generative and self-extensive power of a language is therefore not a property inherent in it, but comes from the fact that we use it when we speak, and in this use of it, we bend it to our purposes. [...] The generative and self-extensive power usually attributed to the language as such [*langue*] is thus a characteristic of language-in-general, more or less as the growth of constant capital is in reality a characteristic of production viewed as a whole. [...] Disregarding the generative and self-extensive power of a language, the supporters of linguistic relativity have concentrated their attention on languages as objective structures, as autonomous systems which are completely or very predominantly immobile, and have been realized once and for all. At a more radical level they have sundered the language [*langue*] from common speech. They too saw speech as something individual; their merit has been that of discerning the ways in which it is subject to the machinery of the language rather than prevailing over it. *A fortiori* the idea of language [*langage*] as the sum or synthesis of the language [*langue*] and common speech could not even arise. (pp. 63 – 64)

So it is at this stage that the first mystifying confusion/substitution happens:

In this way the relative permanence of the constant capital, that is of *the* language, within the process of linguistic production was extrapolated and took on a role which was made artificially fundamental. A simple way of saying this is that the notion of a language replaced the notion of language-in-general [*langage*]. A part was put in the place of the whole, and what is more, a static part in the place of a dynamic

① Words in italic in square brackets here and after are also Rossi-Landi's.

whole; the materials, the instruments, and the money were invested with functions and properties which by rights belong only to the work which is done with them. [...] By putting the language [*langue*] in the place of language [*langage*], the *new work*, which can be done with that very same constant capital by speech, was in effect neglected; and, the more so, the modifications, which can then be made on the constant capital so as to better adapt it to the new work to be done, were ignored. (p. 64)

The second critical point is equally important and it leads to two further developments: a schematic definition in five steps of the logic on which linguistic relativity rests; and a sketch of the complex question of alienation. Let us unite Rossi-Landi's reflections on these subjects. First of all, without denying Marx's statement "that, at a more complex level, consumption and production are identical" (p. 65, footnote), he writes:

On the other hand, the *use of products* is not, *sic et simpliciter*, production [...]. He who uses products is not producing them. The sense in which by speaking we reproduce linguistic products is an attenuated sense; the sense in which such products are consumed is similarly attenuated. The supporters of linguistic relativity have always idealistically believed that every speaker recapitulated in his own mind the production of linguistic products, whereas he is in fact simply *using* them. In this way they have postulated mental processes which accompany the use of the constant linguistic capital and indeed which reproduce its objective structure in the mind of the speaker. Such processes would necessarily repeat, within each individual, the grand and toilsome social processes by means of which language [*langage*] has developed over hundreds of thousands of years, accumulating and becoming organized in the superindividual form of a language [*langue*] i. e. of a constant linguistic capital. (pp. 64 – 65)

This sort of ideological distortion based on a series of mental processes of abstraction and reification leads to erroneous conclusions:

Now, nobody wants to deny unrestrictedly the existence of processes which may be called mental. What we do deny is that they exist as *something which accompanies* the use of language: *this* use is *itself* the mental process. Therefore not even an influence of the use on thought obtains. Whorf's Hopi friend, like any other speaker, uses, and consumes while partially reproducing, products which are already present in his language. It is by studying production, that the specialist Whorf discerned in it so many distinct operations. But there is no production within the speaker (the production

took place a very long time ago, and is a question not of individual but of social processes); and the influence which Whorf thought he had perceived does not exist. (p. 65)

Although Rossi-Landi defends Whorf from Levi-Strauss' accusation of superficiality in treating the connections between language and culture (p. 67), he seizes the occasion to come back to other mistaken separations that can be found in the thesis of linguistic relativity. It seems to him that its logic "can perhaps be summed up in the following five points or steps" (p. 68):

(1) "Splitting of the language [*langue*] from language [*langage*], that is, of the constant linguistic capital from the rest of linguistic production" (p. 68); this means, as we have seen, that the processing concerning work through common speech is neglected.

(2) "Extrapolation of the language (already split off in the above manner) from the totality of which it is part together with all the rest of the life of the community, that is from other activities and institutions." (p. 68)

(3) "The establishment of a relationship, if not always directly causal, at least to some extent conditioning or of concomitance, between the language thus extrapolated and the rest of that totality", according to "a system of relationships which was global and necessitating" and not specific and determined. (p. 68)

(4) "Re-totalization of the two separated items, that is, of the language as such, and of all the rest of the original totality." (p. 69)

(5) "From the sub-totality designated as 'all the rest of culture', thought was extracted (variously defined as the fundamental categories taken as a whole, the content of the thoughts which are actually thought, world-views, philosophies, and the like); and it was made into the effect or 'determinee' of the other sub-totality." (p. 69)

Rossi-Landi specifies that till the first two steps "we could conceivably be dealing with operations which by themselves are neutral and legitimate" for each research that tries to distinguish its object and be included in a precise tradition of studies (p. 68). But what happens after that point, in particular with re-totalization,

is no longer neutral and legitimate, because it gives rise to separatistic fallacy. In fact, if one "retotalizes" in this situation, he has already excluded all *other* possible relationships; that is, he has excluded in advance all relationships which do not belong

to that single, global system of relationships which has been set up between the two separated parts. (p. 69)

So between these two sub-totalities (the language and “everything else”), “one of them [is] invested with a causative or determinative power over the other” (p. 69). In addition, as we have said, this power was addressed towards a further specific extrapolation (thought) from the second sub-totality. Rossi-Landi affirms that in this separatism, researchers followed their glottological interests, which “seemed to receive a real confirmation in the linguistic immediacy of thought” (p. 69). But by accomplishing this type of separatist extrapolations and re-totalizations, among all the causal or reciprocal relationships that can be found in the original totality of culture, the theorists of linguistic relativity show once again the background of their philosophical attitude: “A re-totalization of this kind is nothing less than idealistic; the idea of the thing is substituted for the thing itself.” (p. 70)

It is true that Rossi-Landi gives a central position in a future global science of man to semiotics, but, probably for that reason, he does not forget that in the study of social totality it cannot be satisfied with mere glottological instruments:

To the extent to which they abandoned themselves to the consequences of the fourth and fifth steps, Whorf and the others were advancing a *pseudo-linguistic* hypothesis, that is a hypothesis expressed in the language of linguistics but not verifiable with the means provided by that science. (pp. 69 – 70)

Rossi-Landi’s semiotic perspective is totally different:

If we want to study the way in which thought is determined in all its developments up to the point of including spontaneous and sophisticated world-views, we shall have to turn our attention to the sum total of economic, social, and cultural conditions. We shall find that what we describe as linguistic is, if anything, a part of their phenomenology. (p. 70)

In other words, still Rossi-Landian, we must not forget “it is with the whole of his social organization that man communicates”^①.

① This passage in Rossi-Landi 1975, p. 16, or in Italian: Rossi-Landi 2016, p. 61; “Sul linguaggio verbale e non-verbale” (Rossi-Landi, 1968, p. 106); “Le merci come messaggi” (Rossi-Landi, 1972, p. 117).

IV. Alienation and Linguistic Relativity

As to the second development concerning the question of alienation, we must start again from the conception of “language as work” to understand other critical points of the theory. But this time also neo-positivistic critics fall into Rossi-Landi’s criticism. Indeed,

one can say that the ideology of linguistic relativity consists principally in a great illusion which is bearer of both non-verbalized false consciousness and precise and complex ideological propositions—both of these accompanied by their respective false praxis. It is the illusion of believing that the *theoretical* exhibition of the structures of the various languages, that is, of their constitutive differences, is by itself in some way sufficient to remedy the state of linguistic alienation or at least to alleviate it. The exhibition of the concrete working operations which must or can be carried out with a language, the description of them in their component steps, but leaving aside the question of exploitation—this is supposed to hold the arcane power of preventing or alleviating exploitation itself. The root of this illusion lies in a fact which is systematically neglected by those farmers of facts who are the neopositivistic critics of linguistic relativity: *those operations must after all have been carried out, otherwise we would not have their products before us now*. The work of which the idealist speaks is mystified work; but it is still work. If there is a product, there must have been the work which produced it. (pp. 74 – 75)

Once again, the case of the American Indians reveals the reasons that lie beneath the above-mentioned fallacious assertions of the theorists of linguistic relativity,

not for nothing has it been in the study of their languages that the most fascinating formulations of linguistic relativity were formed. The whites have deprived the Redskins of their world-views; now they are trying to “compensate” them by recognizing that these views were “naturally” part of the fabric of their languages and constituted richer, better articulated, and more perfect constant capitals than ours. At the same time, linguistic relativity can in this way even involuntarily lend itself to the smuggling in of a subtle racist streak. The American Indians *are* different *because* their languages *make them* different. How wicked of us to massacre peoples *so different from ourselves*. The fact that use is not the same thing as production also plays a part here: the American Indians use refined linguistic products, but after all they personally are

□ 符号与传媒 (14)

not the same Indians who originally invented them. Let not the merits of the fathers be visited overmuch upon the sons! (p. 75)

The second version of the racist theme, which nourishes—even unconsciously—the agreement around linguistic relativity, brings us directly back to the problem of alienation, which is not circumscribed to specific cases, but is general. We will put together several passages of the text where Rossi-Landi repeatedly refers to that question, following the Marxian analysis of the capitalistic mode of production:

As we have seen, the self-generative power of language [*langage*] is certainly not a property inherent in languages [*langues*] as such. And yet it also concerns languages [*langues*] as constant capitals: the generative power of labour cannot but regard capital. For languages, this happens in the sense that they assume the capacity of lending themselves to any kind of communication and conceptual elaboration. This is one of the directions in which the difficult notion of linguistic money is to be sought. (p. 73)

We have finally understood that the extensive power of “language-in-general” and, through it, of its part of “constant capital” (*langue*) has its origins in the work of the speakers, but they do not seem to be completely masters of the linguistic system of production and reproduction which, in one way or another, slips through their fingers:

But in linguistic production, as in material production, it can happen, and indeed it usually does, that the constant capital takes on a sort of apparently autonomous, monstrous life of its own, subordinating to itself those exponents of linguistic labour power, without whom it could never have formed nor could it continue to exist. (p. 63)

At this point Rossi-Landi turns linguistic relativity upside down in an original way:

It happens that languages interpose between the speaker and the expression of his reactions to the world a sort of autonomous thickness. This is a way of affirming a sort of linguistic relativity the other way round, of indicating how the speaker can be taken from what ought to be his own world-view and brought over to other world-views which right from the beginning are no longer the view originally incorporated in his mother tongue. In other words, whereas the idealistic supporters of linguistic relativity assert that thought and world-view depend directly on the structures of the language as a system [*langue*], what is here being maintained is that the self-generative power of

language [*langage*], as crystallized in the structures of a particular language [*langue*], confers upon the latter a power of distortion. The labour power of the speakers, that is the variable linguistic capital, is then used to impart an unnatural movement to the whole of production. (p. 73)

We must note that Rossi-Landi's discourse tries to explain only the negative process from which the alienation and exploitation of speakers (or “linguistic workers”) come and it must be understood within the Marxian view of workmen (or wage-earners): they both are reduced to exploited consumers of (material and linguistic) products, they have no conscience of their original and actual position as producers that derives from their labour, without which the extensive power (of capital and, thus, of language) does not exist. As the alienated workman does not see the social relations of production, domination and exploitation hidden behind money and serves the formation of a surplus-value that enriches only his masters, so speakers are induced to attribute to products properties that do not belong to them naturally but come from human work; and so they serve a vision of the world that is useful to the dominant classes which hold not only political-economical power, but also the control of codes through which (dominant) ideology is transmitted, with the models of behaviour and the social programmes it dictates, thus serving “a linguistic surplus-value [...] which now has nothing to do with the interests of the workers, i. e. of the speakers” (p. 74) . But there is more:

The linguistic alienation of which we have been speaking is an alienation *ab ovo*. Our line of discussion is therefore one which in the first place concerns a general characteristic of human history. It is from the beginning that the speaker is forced to carry out an undifferentiated linguistic work, one that produces and reproduces linguistic goods which are extraneous to the real operations for reconstructing from the inside the language which he does nevertheless continue to speak. Thus right from the start, a transformation of linguistic producers into *linguistic consumers* is set in motion. More and more the *use* of language takes the place of its *production*. The notion of linguistic use supplants that of linguistic work. Thus the linguistic worker lets himself be dragged on by the “spontaneous” motion of the great machine of the language. In a sense which is fundamental because it is constitutive of what is human, *he no longer thinks about what he is doing when he speaks*. (pp. 75 – 76)

This basic tragedy in the alienated condition of man leads to an alteration of the

perception of social relations, hidden or mystified, as it occurs through the processes of reification, fetishism and reduction to merchandise showed in the Marxian analysis of commodities. Rossi-Landi's passage continues as follows:

In this way the speaker loses his contact and intercourse with nature and with other men; that contact and that intercourse which had originally presided over the formation of his language, and which had been deposited and were represented in it as specific productive operations and in their results, understood as use-values. Since that happened, the linguistic product has been handed down only as already-produced; and the model of the product is re-produced only for the purpose of allowing the consumption of its exemplars in order to aliment the system of production. The needs which language should satisfy—basically, that of being able to really express oneself and that of communicating and of being really understood within the division of labour—have moved into the background. (p. 76)

V. Gleams of Emancipation

We can ask whether in this gloomy outlook there is an issue or not. Rossi-Landi's point of view is aimed to emphasize the questions of alienation, which were neglected by the theorists of linguistic relativity and which also explain some of their ideological (and mystifying) conclusions. Therefore we must not forget that Rossi-Landi never hesitated, mainly in *Ideologia* where the subject is treated in more detail, to call upon a practice of disalienation coming from the knowledge of the human alienated condition and requiring, for a real emancipation from material and linguistic exploitation, a *revolutionary praxis* aimed at the construction of a new society. In this text of 1968/73 there is, however, an unspoken gleam of hope which, by its very omission, deserves an explicit consideration.

As a matter of fact, in the passage about the dialectical overturning of the assumption of linguistic relativity, Rossi-Landi explains the possible changing from one vision of the world to another, though he speaks of this “power of distortion” only in a negative sense, that is, as removal of a right perception of reality of “language as work” towards its mystifying reification. In that context, he affirms that

the speakers become “spoken”. But not only in the immediate sense, which is once again the one idealistic supporters of linguistic relativity propose, according to which the speakers cannot speak except within the structures of their mother tongue and in

this sense are always representing them so that their language speaks through them; but also in a sense, dialectically more complex, according to which the speakers do speak things not foreseen by the objective structure of the language they are in fact speaking and in which they express themselves.^① In this way a laceration is created within linguistic production. The total linguistic capital is handed down and accumulated without its having any further relationship with the human reality of the working process, that is, repressing in itself its own variable portion. (p. 74)

The last statement is further evidence that Rossi-Landi speaks of a drift towards an alienated condition of linguistic production. But if the approach must be really dialectic, then that “laceration” must open up another possible interpretation, a change towards awareness and the attempt to go from alienation to disalienation through a revolutionary praxis. Moreover it is usually the most common way, otherwise we could not explain how, through language, one can discover and describe the processes Rossi-Landi himself spoke of in *Ideologia*, for example. So the issue of the complex question of alienation is not merely that new linguistic material should be produced unceasingly, in order to say that one is producing and not only consuming; but humans must be conscious of what they do when they talk, of processes of domination and exploitation they reproduce (automatically, maybe), and of the social programmes (conservative, reactionary, or revolutionary) they put into practice. Another interesting suggestion comes from an example Rossi-Landi gives soon after speaking of the subordination of the real expressive and communicative needs of human being to the reproduction of a (social and/or linguistic) productive system.

There is a phase in which the child, with his marvelous spontaneity, tries to take hold of the machine of the language as a satisfier of needs, to put himself in the position of producing from it, every time *ex novo*, articulations which are in consonance with his experience of the world and of his fellows, to be himself as a speaker. Thus he plays with words, tampers about with them and mixes them up in various directions; he asks “why?” about everything; and he realizes full well the internal human significance of the words he has learned. It is a phase which may last only a few weeks, for it manifests itself in that extremely delicate moment when the child has already mastered

① Many examples in this direction can be found in Chapter 12 of Rossi-Landi's essay (1973, pp. 56 – 61).

linguistic techniques sufficiently to make himself understood, but has not yet been absorbed into the system of linguistic production. Then he is immediately dragged off, made to conform, and repressed, with the result of transforming him into a linguistic reproducer-consumer. “You have to say it this way”; “it’s that way just *because*”; “you don’t say that”; “this thing *is* that other thing”; and so on. (pp. 76 – 77)

In this beautiful passage we recognize an attitude that is not only of the child Rossi-Landi describes, but also of those poets who—giving precedence to the rights of their free expression, resisting the dictates of the capitalist free-market even in the field of communicative exchange and social relationships, resorting to resources and surprises that come from play, and offering an *analogical* vision of the world which opposes the dominant logic of utilitarianism and indifference—show us that *work* and *play*, *production* and *creation* meet perfectly in poetry, as is confirmed by its Greek etymology: *poiesis*. It is not by mere chance that, apart from the Rossi-Landian analysis and almost in the same years—while they gave their support to the struggles of the American Indian Movement through its French section founded by Robert Jaulin against the ethnocide^① Rossi-Landi denounced too—the French and Czech surrealists who had gathered around Vincent Bounoure published *La civilisation surréaliste* (1976). This is a critique (still valid in many ways) about the dominant social practices of communicative exchange, through the contributions of poetry and collective play, with reflections very similar to the theory of homology between linguistic production and material production, and the consideration of the ideological power of language, which can be enchaining or liberating.^②

After this exposition, it should be easy to understand that Rossi-Landi’s judgement is not merely destructive, because it tries to turn linguistic relativity into a neglected perspective that is full of important revelations for the study of humankind. After all, Rossi-Landi openly recognizes an implicit suggestion of that thesis, which is still valid:

We should recognize that it does indirectly put us on our guard against accepting any kind of metaphysical system or philosophical super-science which, being the expression of a single cultural tradition, eventually overwhelms all the others (or, if

① Cf. Jaulin, 1970.

② On this unexplored convergence (cf. D’Urso, 2013).

incapable of overwhelming, simply ridicules, misunderstands, or ignores them). In this sense the insistence on single natural languages as original and irreducible linguistic models of the universe is a positive feature. It is a methodological indication which is important for the relativization of our instruments of understanding and research, a working hypothesis for the rediscovery of structures which might otherwise escape our attention. (p. 71)

Still valid is also Rossi-Landi's warning in the light of today's researches, whether they are "empirical", "pseudoscientific" or "neo-positivistic", as he defined them then, finding them unable to solve the antinomies of linguistic relativity with studies on the different perceptions of colours, for example. "Nor yet can the solution consist in the idealistic reconstructions, laden with fallacies on their turn, of a Whorf or a Weisgerber." (pp. 78 - 79)

Underneath the antinomies of linguistic relativity lies the whole set of problems regarding alienation and language. These problems are particularly acute in the so-called "civilisations of the white race" which for thousands of years have been swollen with dogmatism and arrogance. These civilisations are the bearers of "separate" sciences, that is of sciences each of which is isolated from the rest of life, and whose technical language is an "abnormal" development of an often very small portion of common language of the people. They have indiscriminately destroyed or ravaged all that they have found in their path, without paying the slightest heed to the point of view of others; they are by now dangerous to themselves and to the rest of mankind; and one still cannot foresee *how*, pervaded as they largely are by the most omnivorous of systems, they will manage to revise their basic attitudes, in themselves extinguishing the evil of misconceived otherness. (p. 79)

The unquestionable utility of linguistic relativity is that it showed the relativity of the observer's standpoint, with all its ideological deformations. They must be demystified in order to reach a real science of human being, that, without neglecting all conditionings determining his choices in each specific case, will not forget what André Breton (1965, p. 13) said in *Arcane17* : "civilisation [...] is *one*." There is no doubt that to transform it in the revolutionary sense indicated by Rossi-Landi himself, the instruments useful to its correct interpretation still have to be improved.

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Author:

Andrea D'Urso, lecturer of French language and literature at the University of Salento, Italy. His research fields include theory, history and sociology of literature, Marxist semiotics, poetry and translation. He mainly concerns in criticism of international Surrealism.

作者简介:

安德里亚·迪尔索, 意大利萨兰托大学的法语语言文学讲师, 其研究领域包括文学理论、文学历史与文学社会学、马克思主义符号学、诗学和翻译等, 目前主要关注国际超现实主义批评。

Email: andrea.durso@unisalento.it